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AUTHOR Balliet, Conrad A.
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Abstract

Spontaneity and personal freedom are seen as the fundamental requisites to creative teaching. Unseen pressures leading to increasing conformity in classroom procedures and methods are revealed and constrasted with unique examples of teaching Thoreau, Kafka, and Donne. Teachers are urged to rely upon their own creative impulses. (RL)

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ON THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

CONRAD A. BALLIET

THOUGH MOST TEACHERS of English literature have not had the experience of a class under the volatile Kitty of Harvard, or the austere Rice of Michigan, most of us have had at least one teacher whose originality, or spontaneity, or wit, or sarcasm deepened our understanding of literature.

There is probably no plot to prevent such teachers from getting classes in the future, but the forces tending against such teaching are manifold and increasing: Project English, national organizations of teachers, courses in educational psychology, books and articles on how to teach, newsletters, research reports, round-table discussions, summer institutes, television, programmed learning, personality tests, CEEB tests, IBM machines. All of these take time and money, but it is time and money devoted to things that can be analyzed, methodized, controlled. All of them can contribute to more efficient and effective teaching, but hand in hand with the contribution lies the threat to what may be called creative teaching.

Before shouting with glee over a sensitive interpretation, or snarling ove. an imperceptive one, the teacher will pause: How would a Master Teacher react? What did that article in *College English* suggest? Is Joan an introvert? Do I digress? Is it Bill's father who drinks? What did the personality test reveal about Sue? He will pause, and in the pause, he will become more like a machine, less human. His anger, his tears, even his sarcasm might create the atmosphere that would lead beyond knowledge to appreciation; his calculation and control will reduce another class to the mediocre level where few are injured and none inspired.

It is, unfortunately, not possible to show what the creative teacher of literature will do if he has the opportunities, for he will ever seek the new and unexpected. It is possible to illustrate what the creative response has been, to show what the creative teacher has done.

It was the first day of discussion on Thoreau's *Walden*. The teacher came in, sat down at the desk, and waited. Students soon became uncomfortable because of the silence. Feet shuffled. Books were rearranged. Chairs squeaked. After a minute, some girls giggled, and boys frowned. The teacher sat looking from student to student, glancing at his book, thinking. Actually, he had no approach planned, and was thinking about how he might start. His glance fell on the chapters called "Sounds" and "Solitude," and he suddenly realized that Thoreau's attitude towards silence was very different from that of the individuals in front of him. His comment on that fact began an illuminating discussion of what silence meant to Thoreau.

Thoreau's *Walden*, which lends itself to creative teaching better than most books, was the subject of discussion in a different class. It was a misty December afternoon; Friday; temperature about 34°. The 2:15 class entered, listless, drowsy, prepared to endure the last bitter hour. The teacher opened the window a little, and the breath of air refreshed his memory: the balmy days of October, the listless students saying, "Let's go outside; this room is so stuffy." The teacher threw back the challenge on that chilly December afternoon, along with Emerson's caution to Thoreau: "I tell him a man was not made to live in a swamp, but a frog. If God had meant him to live in a swamp, he would have made him a frog." The class, to save face, could not decline. Only one student missed the next class because he was in the infirmary; the teacher had a sore throat for two days, but all learned something of what it was to be a Thoreau, and came to appreciate at least one aspect of him that can be appreciated in no other way.

A class was studying Kafka. There had already been a discussion of *The Trial*, though the students claimed that they did not understand the assignment or the kind of world Kafka was describing. On the day students were to have finished the novel,

Mr. Balliet, an Assistant Professor of English at Wittenberg University, has taught for about nine years; he has never offered a course in Methods of Teaching English.

the teacher announced a spot quiz, waited until the moans subsided, then asked these questions (which he had thought of on the spot): 1. What was the name of K's first wife? 2. What was the meaning of the prison cell with three doors? 3. Who was Herr Sitzplatz? 4. Why was the telegram unsigned? The teacher agreed to repeat the questions, to give the students a little extra time; then he collected the papers, looked them over, frowned, muttered "Pretty poor," and began asking students if they had really read the novel: "Not all of it . . . sort of quickly . . . I didn't understand it all." After some further veiled threats and nasty looks, the teacher explained that none of the questions could have been answered on the basis of the text. But the students knew how it felt to live, briefly, in Kafka's world of vague accusations and unprovable guilt.

During the study of the poetry of John Donne, the students seemed eager to have the explanations of the teacher, and reluctant to offer their own. When he spoke, they wrote "as at the Holy Ghost's dictation." Since they seemed so eager for knowledge, the teacher decided to give it to them: "Goe and catche a falling star" referred to a popular Elizabethan pastime of trying to snare meteors in nets; it was most popular with chimney-sweeps, who usually died young. "Get with child a mandrake roote" referred to a plant which, according to Bacon, reproduced by parthenogenesis, and for that reason was short-lived. By request, "parthenogenesis" was put on the board. "Tell me where all past yeares are" referred to a vegetable eaten by the common people—our "yam" is a derivative of "yeare"—and Donne is here concerned with the digestive functions; further, "yeares" were eaten when still young and tender—again the concern with short life. And so on through the poem, showing that the theme of the poem is the short life of love. After the authoritative explanation there was a pause; "Any questions?" No questions. "The next poem concerns . . ." It was not until just before a test that the students received a warning: they had at least one poem in their notes with a ridiculous explanation. They learned something of the complexity of Donne, as well as of the necessity for individual thought.

Some of these examples may involve the histrionic and the merely clever, but all served at least as stimuli to the study, discussion, and appreciation of literature. They resulted not from premeditation, or planning, or methods courses, but spontaneously from somewhere within the personality of the individual teachers, who should and do have their own "well of English undefiled." And these are but a few examples from the limited experience of one student and teacher. Multiply them by the thousands of individuals and the hundreds of thousands of classes—the opportunities are manifold. To express himself creatively, however, the teacher needs to be free—free from rules, from pressure, from obligations, from too little and too much knowledge; he must feel himself more than a blinking transistor in an electronic computer. If he will but rely, occasionally, on his own creative impulses, he will, to return to Thoreau, "achieve a success undreamed of in his commoner hours."

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